

Motivational Theory

Motivational theory is considered by some to not stand on its own at all as a theory of instruction. However, it does fit within the "metamodel" for instructional theories in that it deals with conditions, strategies and goals of instruction.

Motivational theory has its roots in psychology as do most of the major instructional theories. The major thinker on motivation is the American Abraham Maslow, who devised a six-level hierarchy of motives that he claimed determined human behavior. These motives or needs are ranked by Maslow as follows: 1) physiological, 2) security and safety, 3) love and feelings of belonging, 4) competence, prestige and esteem, 5) self-fulfillment, and 6) curiosity and the need to understand. Psychologists have also debated whether or not humans are motivated to reduce stimulation or to optimize it. While some physiological systems clearly seem to seek reduction of stimulation, many recent cognitive theories of motivation describe humans as seeking optimal stimulation, which some feel accounts for exploratory behavior as well as a human need for variety, aesthetics, and curiosity.

Clearly, based on the psychological study of motivation, there is a strong behaviorist connection to the theory. The idea that humans can be motivated at all suggest behavioral changes. However, whereas behaviorism concentrates upon lawful changes in behaviors created by stimuli as learning, motivational theory deals with the processes and structures that cause us to want to learn.

Motivational instructional theory identifies four major dimensions of motivation: 1) interest, 2) relevance, 3) expectancy, and 4) satisfaction. Interest refers to whether the learner's curiosity is aroused and whether that arousal is sustained over time. Relevance is the perception of the learner as to whether the instruction satisfies personal needs or goals. Expectancy refers to the learner's perceived likelihood of success and how much in control of that success the learner is. Finally, satisfaction refers to intrinsic motivations and reactions to extrinsic rewards.

While we have addressed the attitudinal difficulties that some have with motivation as a theory of instruction, it must be added that there are technical limitations to the application of motivational theory alone. More practical is the application of motivational principles in conjunction with another theory of instruction. Motivation can be defined as intensity at a task. The higher the motivation, the more persistent and intense at a task the learner will perform. We must also differentiate between motivation, which refers to what a person will do, and ability, which refers to what a person can do. Motivation directly involves choices that people make as to what they will do or not do and how intense their effort will be. The goal of motivational theory is to better understand the influences upon these choices and how to direct them to make a task more interesting.

We must use direct measures in motivational theory as opposed to surrogate measures, which do influence motivation strongly but only aid in predicting initial motivation. Surrogate measures are conditions such as socioeconomic status, which provide motivation but are beyond the control of the instructor. Direct measures, although less correlated with performance, are under the control of the instructor and thus can identify motivational problems more specifically as well as demonstrate the effects of instructional techniques on motivation.

Performance in motivational theory, refers to actual accomplishment whereas the level of engagement of the individual to task is called effort. Because effort represents the persistence and/or vigor of a behavior, we know that it can indicate motivation.

The four main areas of motivation, as listed above, have several principles associated with them. Interest, for example, depends to a great deal on whether the learner's curiosity has been engaged. According to motivational studies, people tend to be more interested in: 1) things they already know something about or believe in, although the unexpected and unfamiliar can be intriguing within reason, 2) real people and events involving

humanity as opposed to abstract or hypothetical events, 3) anecdotes and other devices in which a personal, emotional element is injected into an otherwise purely intellectual or procedural material.

Relevance relies upon three particular motives: achievement, affiliation and power. Achievement refers to the desire to overcome obstacles, accomplish goals and tasks and to succeed at things. Affiliation is the desire to have close personal relationships with other people that are two-way. Power, on the other hand, is the ability to influence people.

Expectancy deals with both others (as opposed to the learner), in which expectations of others are defined as a self-fulfilling prophecy, that is a belief by the teacher that he/she can bring about a change. Expectations of oneself are more self directed and include: locus of control, personal causation and learned helplessness. Locus of control is separated into two categories: internally oriented, whereby the person believes that personal effort brings about advantages, and externally oriented, where the person feels that consequences are not under their control. Personal causation is the idea that personal effort will lead to positive results. It requires the conviction that one can do the task at hand. Learned helplessness develops when an individual who wants to and is expected to succeed, finds success impossible. Learned helplessness negatively correlates to effort in that as effort lags, learned helplessness generally will increase.

Satisfaction comes from intrinsic motivation and extrinsic reward. If the extrinsic reward is poor or negative, intrinsic motivation can be damaged.

The key to implementing motivational strategies begins with an analysis of the (motivationally based) problem at hand. Then a strategy must be developed that involves all four motivational categories. The strategy is implemented and evaluated for success/failure and then revised.

There are few specific, prescriptive strategies for motivational theory. The benefits are the integration of numerous strategies for increasing motivation, the facilitation of effort to integrate motivational theory (and strategies) with instructional theory, and allowing a problem solving approach to the solving of motivational problems.

[Back](#) to the menu of theories.